



Happy Birthday Harry!

By Larry Ragle

Harry Hirao is affectionately called Mr. California Juniper. He earned this title by collecting raw material and creating an incredible number of masterpiece California juniper bonsai.

He is a co-founder of one of the largest bonsai clubs in America, Kofu Bonsai Kai, with 400 members. He is a past Director of the Golden State Bonsai Federation and presently serves on the Board of the California Bonsai Society. He is a longtime member and past president of John Naka's select club, Nanpu Kai. He is an Honorary Member of the Board of Directors of the National Bonsai Foundation.

In 1981 he was honored with an award of the "Ryoku Hakiju Yukosho" medal by Prince Takamatsu of Japan and the Japanese Agricultural Society for his contributions to the art of bonsai in the United States. He is also selected on a regular basis to conduct demonstrations and workshops at national bonsai conventions and at bonsai clubs throughout the United States.

Harry was born in 1917 in Longmont, Colorado. By the time he was eight years old his family had decided that Harry should be educated in the traditional Japanese manner, in Japan. Thus Harry traveled to the family farm in Fukuoka, on Kyushu, the southern most major island of Japan. There he spent the next eight years living the life of a student. If the intense educational process lacked anything, life on the farm provided everything else that he needed to mature. The culture of Japan offered many diversions for a young man and although surrounded by Japanese art, including bonsai, as he made his way around Japan, this dormant interest lay hidden in his subconscious.

In 1933 at the age of 16, Harry returned to Colorado. He soon took up with another young man with a similar background, John Y. Naka. These two adventurers, when farm work was done, headed for the mountains. Both remembered climbing over beautifully sculptured stones, while pulling on the branches of oddly twisted and gnarly ancient pines and fighting their way into



Alyce and Harry Hirao

secluded ponds along the high streams of the Rockies. But they searched only for trout! While their sharp eyes peered onto the crystal clear surface looking for fish, neither recognized that nature was painting their future in the reflections on the glittering water.

Working and fishing were Harry's life for a number of years. Then he met Chiyo (Alyce) and his life changed dramatically. They married on September 25, 1941. Less than three months later World War II began in the Pacific. While Japanese-American were subjected to internment elsewhere in the country, the Governor of Colorado refused to intern any American citizen, and so Harry and Alyce were spared the indignity of incarceration.

In 1951 Harry moved his family to Huntington Beach, California and started a new business, landscaping and gardening. For the next few years the Hiraos were kept busy with their expanding business and growing family, Ron, Gene, Ilene and Janice, leaving Harry time for only one hobby: fishing.

By the late 1950s Harry began to notice that some of his fishing buddies seemed to have less and less time for fishing. In particular, one friend, John Naka, who had also moved from Colorado to Los Angeles in 1946, seemed to have no time for their once favored pastime. Curious, Harry investigated and found that John had a new hobby—bonsai.

On a visit to John's house, Harry saw bonsai, not for the first time. But he saw it now in a different way. He was excited by what had once seemed a distant art form from the culture he had experienced only temporarily. More importantly, this visit had opened his subconscious interest in bonsai. (The key was John Naka, his longtime friend.)

A short time later John invited Harry to go with him on a trip to the Mojave Desert. John had been told that there were some very old and stunted trees growing along the mountain ridges. Neither realized at the time just how significant that moment was when they spotted their first ancient California juniper. And neither did the trees. Many of them would soon leave their harsh isolated environment where their beauty was unnoticed, to become the focal point of prized bonsai collections. Two forms of life, man and plant, had become one and that bond would change the lives of Harry and John,

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President's Letter



many more happy years of digging bonsai, discovering viewing stones, and bringing joy to all of his friends.

The winter months just coming to a close have been busy for NBF and the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum.

NBF's redesigned website (www.bonsai-nbf.org), which was launched at the beginning of December, has received numerous accolades. This new website is being updated frequently, so please visit it often to stay up-to-date on what is happening at the Museum. If you did not see the Museum's three recent exhibits—*Winter Silhouettes*, *Mountain Stones* and the *Lunar New Year*—or perhaps would like to refresh your memory of them, photographs from each of them are now posted on the website.

We also printed a Museum Exhibits and Programs brochure for 2007 that features **Vaughn Banting's** stunning American Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) in its full fall glory. This poster/brochure is now being mailed out to those who have renewed their NBF membership for 2007. If you have not yet renewed, please do so now so that we may send you a copy of this new brochure.

Then in January, **Christy Hilberg**, the Museum gardener, resigned to pursue grad-

uate studies at the University of Maryland. Under Christy's hand, the garden areas of the Museum never looked better, and her departure is a real loss. As a farewell gift, we gave her a lifetime membership in NBF so she "looks forward to continuing to be a part of the Museum in the years ahead."

In mid-February, **Boon Manakitivipart** of California accepted an invitation from the Museum and NBF to visit the Museum, and gave valuable advice to the curators and assisted in repotting some of the bonsai. And then in late February, as part of his rookie year of bonsai training, Assistant Curator **Aarin Packard** traveled to California for a week organized by **Marybel Balendonck** to hone his bonsai skills under the tutelage of **Harry Hirao**, **Cheryl Manning**, **Roy Nagatoshi** and **Takashi Shimazu**.

We are sad to report the passing of our good friend and colleague **Chris J. Yeapanis**. Chris served on the NBF Board with great dedication for many years and always brought wise counsel and good cheer to our activities and meetings. He will be sincerely missed by all who knew him, and we express our deepest sympathies to his wife **Betty Yeapanis**.

We also are sad to report the passing of **Dr. Howard C. Vanzant**, a leader of the bonsai community in Texas who has been a generous benefactor of the Museum. In 2002, the Museum dedicated the "Maria Rivero Vanzant Upper Courtyard" in memory of his late wife.

Felix

Chris J. Yeapanis

NBF Board of Directors member, Chris J. Yeapanis of Fairfax, Virginia, died on January 25th. A Board Member for many years he also served as Treasurer. He was active in the Potomac Bonsai Association (PBA), a founder of the Potomac Viewing Stone Group and a regular contributor to *Clippings*, the PBA monthly newsletter. He served as President of the Northern Virginia Bonsai Society, President of the Potomac Viewing Stone Group and Educational Vice President of PBA. He was one of the original organizers of the 5th World Bonsai Convention in Washington D.C. in 2005. Chris had an extensive network of bonsai and viewing stone friends on both coasts.



Chris J. Yeapanis, 1948–2007.

HARRY HIRAO

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Photo: Courtesy of The Hirao Family

Young Harry.



Photo: Courtesy of The Hirao Family.

Student Harry.



Photo: Courtesy of The Hirao Family

Harry with his Mother.



Photo: Courtesy of Larry and Nina Ragle

Harry at work.

and ultimately, bring pleasure to thousands of people.

Negotiating with the property owner was a simple matter. An annual fee was agreed upon and a permit to dig was issued. The process began. Almost as rewarding as finding the trees in the first place was discovering that they were amazingly forgiving. The trees took little time to overcome the shock of transplanting and showed scarce resentment to the rigors of Harry's plans for their future, the pruning, trimming and wiring. Studying with John Naka, Harry had gained the knowledge of creating bonsai from raw material. In only a few years one could see the change in the junipers, from scrubby neglected clumps to magnificent masterpieces.

It would not be unusual to imagine that the location of these beauties would be kept a solemn secret. If you located a diamond mine would you invite all your friends over to dig up these treasures for themselves? But Harry and John didn't see it that way. Both invited their friends, and ultimately their students, to dig along side of them and to share in their riches. If you ask anyone who knows Harry to describe his personality, they will always

mention his generosity first. Harry continues to lead field trips to the mountains on an almost daily basis during the digging season.

Yet there was something missing from Harry's life. After only a few years of total commitment to bonsai, Harry started to cheat on his trees, just a little at first. It started out as a simple trip to the Kern River but it eventually became a second obsession. Harry was in love with stones. So the art of viewing stone appreciation became a major part of Harry's life.

While on a trip to Northern California in the mid 1970s Harry and Alyce came upon a river bed full of beautiful stones, many of them possessing the qualities of suiseki. Since that time there has been a significant shift in the center of mass for the state of California. It now tilts slightly to the south. And Harry is as generous with his suiseki as he is with his trees. In fact, if his students can't find and dig their own tree or stone, Harry is quick to give them one. Harry continues to make field trips to the rivers of California, inviting his friends and students along for the hunt.

Harry donated the first American viewing stone to the National Collection in

Washington, D.C. When the John Y. Naka North American Bonsai Pavilion opened to the public, one of Harry's incredible California junipers was proudly displayed in the Harry Hirao Reception Room, of the Yuji Yoshimura Center. It was made possible by the generous donations made by many of the same friends that Harry has shared his treasures with over the years.

After the passing of his beloved wife, Alyce, in 2002, Harry donated three masterpiece viewing stones in her memory to the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum. These stones are on permanent display in the Chiyoko Alyce Hirao Viewing Stone Exhibit of the Maria Rivero Vanzant Upper Courtyard of the Museum.

Harry is a major contributor to the Golden State Bonsai Collections, North and South. Along with several magnificent bonsai, Harry has donated seven huge viewing stones to the Huntington Library and Botanical Garden, in San Marino, California. These stones are featured in the Harry Hirao Viewing Stone Courtyard in the Japanese Garden.

Harry Hirao, who remains Mr. California Juniper, turned 90 years old on March 12th. Harry has four lives, his family, friends, bonsai and suiseki.



Photo: Courtesy of Larry and Nina Ragle

Harry and Alyce with Harry's tree in the Harry Hirao Reception Room.



Photo: Courtesy of Larry and Nina Ragle

Harry with tokonoma display in memory of Alyce.



Photo: Courtesy of Larry and Nina Ragle

Harry with his bonsai treasures.

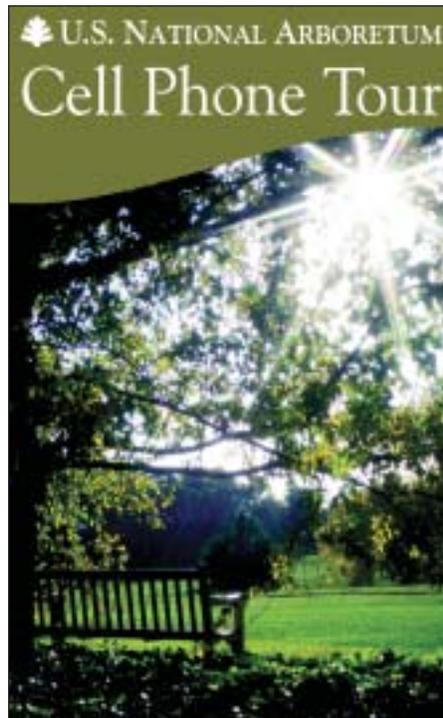
Utilizing Today's Technology

By James Hughes

The next time that you visit the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum please be sure to bring your cell phone. Unlike many places that you might visit, we ask you to turn your cell phones on when you walk through our collections. But you must use them for listening and not for talking.

The Educations and Visitor Services Unit of the Arboretum has introduced Cell Phone Tours for visitors. Recently the Museum acquired this program. To use the tour just dial the posted tour number on your cell phone and then enter the numbers that are featured on signs throughout the museum. Recorded information that you can retrieve includes facts about the Museum, commonly asked questions about the collections, and background information about featured trees. The call is free but you will use your minutes on your cell phone.

This system allows us to get accurate information about the Museum out to many of our visitors in an efficient and cost effective manner. Also as the seasons change certain trees merit special attention at particular times of the year. This



Cell Phone Tour Brochure.

system allows us to feature these highlights by easily changing the recorded messages.

Currently, only the National Herb Garden and the Museum are providing cell phone tours at the U.S. National Arboretum. Soon the tours will be available in all of the major gardens. Please give it a try the next time you visit us.

Visit of Yotaro Ono

By Aarin Packard

Yotaro Ono, President of the Zen Garden Society of Kyoto, and his son, Tetustaro, visited the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum in January. The elder Ono is a landscape architect in Kyoto and is also the head of the Bichu den Takeuchi ryu School of traditional martial arts. Mr. Ono was in Washington to design and install a warriors zen garden in honor of the samurai Miyamoto Musashi for a National Geographic Society exhibit in their Hall of Explorers Museum. The exhibit, *The Spirit of Japanese Gardens*, is on display until April 29th.

Mr. Ono also gave a lecture, *The Warrior's Garden: The Essence of Miyamoto Musashi's Zen and Sword*, at the Japanese



Yotaro Ono, Thomas S. Elias and Tetustaro Ono with the Yamaki Pine.

Information and Cultural Center. Wearing samurai garb he introduced the lecture with a superb display of martial arts and the masterful use of a *katana* (Japanese sword). In his presentation he explained how the principles of Zen and martial arts have inspired his gardens, including his most recent creation for the National Geographic Society.



Membership in the National Bonsai Foundation is based on the calendar year. Therefore, if you have not yet renewed your membership for 2007, it is due now. Membership in NBF includes receiving the *NBF Bulletin*, a 10% discount on books published by NBF, invitations to Special Museum events, an NBF Member decal, as well as having the honor and distinction of supporting the world's first and finest bonsai and penjing Museum.

In addition, every January NBF publishes a handsome colored poster/brochure of the schedule of exhibits and programs in the Museum for the coming year. This poster/brochure will be mailed to all those who join or renew.

Please send a check or credit card information in the envelope enclosed for your convenience.

The categories of support are:

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(\$25 for Charter members)

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*Thank you for your support
of the National Bonsai &
Penjing Museum.*

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